

BAND-I-AMIR

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BAND-I-AMIR is the name given to a chain of five small lakes, or more correctly to the dams which form them, situated about lat. $34^{\circ} 50' N.$, long. $67^{\circ} 12' E.$ in the Yakh Walang district of Afghanistan. They lie at an altitude of about 9500 feet stretched out along the valley of a stream which takes its name from them and which after many wanderings in the mountains eventually debouches into the plains of Northern Afghanistan to feed the eighteen canals of the Hijdehnahr district with the water they conserve. The shores of the most important of the lakes, which bears the name of Band-i-Haibat, can be reached by car from Bamian without very much difficulty in fair weather during the summer and autumn. The distance is about 45 miles and the journey takes four hours to perform. Three passes have to be crossed—the Shahidan (9945 feet), the Shibartu (10,235 feet), and the Kham Kotal (11,660 feet). The last of these is difficult to distinguish and is merely the highest of a series of undulations on an elevated plateau, which when we crossed it in August was dotted with the black encampments of nomad Ghilzais. The gradients are nowhere very severe but some very sharp bends have to be negotiated during the ascent of the Shahidan Pass from the eastern side. During wet weather the soft soil in some of the depressions in the hills turns into deep mud and the road becomes impassable, while in winter the whole country is deep in snow. From the plateau described above the road descends sharply down a narrow spur and before long the traveller sees about 1000 feet below him a strip of vivid blue surrounded by tremendous slopes. This is a portion of the Band-i-Zulfiqar, the uppermost and largest of the lakes. It is about 4 miles long. Another portion of it lying broad and open comes into view farther down the road, with trees along its nearer edge, the only ones visible as far as the eye can range. The second of the lakes—the Band-i-Panir—lies immediately below the Band-i-Zulfiqar and is little more than a pond, being only about 150 yards across. The road gradually descends towards the third lake, the Band-i-Haibat, which is about 2 miles long and 500 yards broad. Its sapphire waters blaze like a jewel in the huge expanse of bare hills. Sheer pink cliffs with numerous inlets enclose the upper portion of the lake. Its southern end is open and the water laps over the great dam of natural rock and falls in thin cascades on to a sort of platform 40 feet beneath. This platform, which is partly rock and partly soil, is all covered with a white or pale yellow deposit, presumably of sulphur, and the water trickles over it to form another small lake a mile or so below. This lake which is known as the Band-i-Kambar is merely a shallow pool. The fifth and last lake—the Band-i-Ghulaman—can be seen in the distance below it. It is circular, roughly three-quarters of a mile in diameter, and said to be quite shallow.



Band-i-Haibat, looking north





Band-i-Haibat



created a series of natural dams and formed these unexpected lakes. The barrier at the end of the Band-i-Haibat itself is a wall of solid rock about 40 feet high at the centre, of no very great thickness at any rate at the top and forming an almost perfect curve. The barrier which encloses the Band-i-Zulfiqar is said to be similar in character. The other three barriers are not so perfect and have only allowed comparatively small quantities of water to collect. The traveller crosses the white platform below the Band-i-Haibat and comes up on the western side of the lake where stands a white shrine sacred to Hazrat Ali, the son-in-law of the Prophet. All round the edge of the lake just below its surface runs a ledge of pure white rock which makes even deeper the intense blue of its waters. Swarms of great yellow fishes swim lazily about, and the whole with the quaint white shrine and the straight pink cliffs produces an impression of something nearer fairyland than anything else in this world that it has been my fortune to see.

Soon after our arrival the local Hazaras began to collect and sat quietly round the shrine watching us. One produced a rope—rather than a line—and caught one or two of the yellow fish—which are known locally as *chush*. I went for a swim but the water was so cold that I did not stay in more than a minute. The lake is locally reputed to be unfathomable. It is said that the Amir Habibullah endeavoured to measure it and failed to find the bottom with 75 yards of rope. Numerous flowers grow round the open southern end of the lake and on the face of the rock barrier where it is not too steep. The Shiah Hazaras of the neighbourhood ascribe a miraculous origin to these dams which are so much stronger than anything human art could build. It is stated that in the days of old the land was ruled by an infidel king called Barbar (from whom the lakes are also sometimes referred to as the Band-i-Barbar), who oppressed his subjects mercilessly. One of them, who had been unable to pay some money demanded by the king and whose wife and children had been imprisoned in consequence, went in search of Hazrat Ali to obtain his assistance. He found him on the road near Haibak. Hazrat Ali told him to tie him up with a rope and take him for sale as a slave to Barbar. He was to demand an extravagant price and when Barbar asked the reason to say that the slave could do anything he was told to. This was done and Barbar demanded that the slave should perform three tasks in one day. The first was to kill the dragon of Bamian, the second to dam the valley where the lakes now lie, and the third to bring him the head of Ali. Ali forthwith slew the dragon of Bamian, and then in a mighty rage hurled the rocks together to form the Band-i-Haibat or the Dam of Wrath. He next as with a sword clove the mountains and created the Band-i-Zulfiqar or the Dam of the Swordsman. He then presented himself before Barbar and told him to load him with every chain he possessed. When he had been thus bound he recited the Muham-

as having been created by the Amir, *i.e.* Hazrat himself. The Band-i-Kambar was built by Kambar, the groom of Hazrat Ali, and the Band-i-Ghulaman or the Dam of the Slaves by the fifty thousand servants of Kambar. Immediately below the rock barrier of the Band-i-Haibat there is a spot where the water wells forth icy cold to form a small pool. The water is crystal clear and the bottom of the pool is of a uniform pale yellow. The spring is called the Ab-i-Safa or the Pure Water and is reputed to have miraculous medicinal properties. The story goes that after Hazrat Ali created the dam it proved so efficient that it let no water pass. The people lower down the valley complained, on which Ali with a blow of his fist made the hole through which the water now springs.

It is perhaps hardly necessary to state that Hazrat Ali never visited Afghanistan and that the legends connecting him with the creation of these purely natural dams have no foundation in history whatever.

